

Willow Creek

When the woman interviewing me for a position at the Willow Creek nursing home asked me why I wanted to work with the elderly I told her that when my own grandparents died the nurses and aides taking care of them had been so patient and kind that I was inspired to do the same for other people's parents and grandparents in the future. I said helping people was a matter very close to my heart.

Personally I've never wanted to get old. I have never been able to imagine myself living long enough to develop gray hair, have grandchildren, and cash social security checks. I liked to think I'd off myself before I became incontinent or forced to use a walker. It seemed like the worst possible future for me, living to a ripe old age. According to my therapist I have a death wish.

I was living with my parents in my childhood bedroom with baby blue walls and a ceiling painted to look like the sky. The rim around the overhead light was painted yellow, my own personal sun I could control with the flick of a switch. The deal was that I could live either in their house or at the other place. Living alone was not an option. My parents checked on me constantly, like I was a cake they were afraid to overcook.

I spent my days floating through the house like a wraith. At nights I sat in my room writing poems about drugs I've never tried and boys I've never slept with. I'd start a book and then put it down before getting through the first chapter. I listened to music with vocals so sorrowful and bellowing that my dad said it sounded like I was listening to whale calls. I could only watch television under their supervision. I wasn't allowed to look at magazines.

One night my mom brought me a copy of a Nurse's Assistant Training course pamphlet. There was a smiling Asian girl on the front with a stethoscope wound around her neck. Her smile was so rigid I thought she'd be able to keep smiling even if the stethoscope had been a boa constrictor. The rest of the brochure was just as artificial. Phrases like *concentrating on quality*, *building blocks for successful* were bolded. My mom was a sucker for brochures like this. The doctors at the other place were always giving her trifolds filled with what I'm sure were invaluable bits of knowledge.

"You were going to be a psychology major. This is almost the next best thing," my mom said, pressing the brochure into my hands. I knew where this was coming from. My therapist thought—and my parents agreed—that I needed to find a job. They thought I needed direction and stimulation. I had promised that I would try harder so I said okay and took the course.

A week after my interview at Willow Creek I got the job.

On my first day my mom made me breakfast: a bowl of yogurt with chunks of strawberries in it, two hard boiled eggs, and herbal tea. The strawberry's juices were bleeding out into the yogurt, staining it pink. My mom busied herself in the kitchen, but I knew she was watching me. She was in charge of my meals. Every time she heard me pick up the spoon in the yogurt bowl she would tense.

I looked at my upside down and distorted reflection in the silver spoon, thinking that since the human eye sees everything upside down then this was my true reflection. I flipped the spoon over and there I was again, right side up. I brought the spoon farther away from my face, my reflection lengthening into an oval. I thought of what my doctor in the other place told me, "We see what the brain tells us to see, not what's really there."

What unreliable things reflections are.

When my mom saw what I was doing she said, “Eleanor eat your breakfast.”

I wasn’t supposed to look at mirrors for too long.

The senior nurse at Willow Creek was a woman named Selma Alvarez. She met me in the lobby.

Willow Creek reminded me of the children’s ward in the hospital; they tried to make the kids feel more comfortable by painting balloons and circus animals on the walls, but in my experience even the most whimsical décor doesn’t make you forget you’re dying. At Willow Creek they tried to make it cheerful with bright flowers and oil paintings of landscapes and country roads; piano music played over the speakers. I suppose the intent was to bring a touch of the familiar to the unfamiliar, but it was about as effective as putting a party hat on the grim reaper.

“You’ll be on the long term care floor,” Selma said. She pressed a button on the elevator and the lift shuddered up. We came out onto a floor shaped like an H. There was a sallow faced woman behind the nurse’s station, writing notes in a binder. “This is Beth, she’ll be training you today. I’ll leave you two to it,” Selma said and trudged off.

Beth explained to me in a monotone what my responsibilities would be. Help patients go to the bathroom, rub their feet, do their laundry. The dirty work. When my grandpa was going in for chemo treatments he shit his pants once and my dad had to take him into the bathroom to clean it up. I remember thinking that I wasn’t sure I’d be able to do that for my dad, and now here I was doing it for strangers. The irony didn’t escape me.

As Beth spoke a patient came up to the desk. She was a petite woman who walked with her hips thrust forward; it was a determined gait. She wore a surprisingly coordinated outfit of shades of pink—even her jewelry and lipstick matched. Her white hair was combed back and set with hair spray. She would have seemed out of place were it not for the fact that she never stopped grinding her teeth, like she was trying to work out a problem she couldn't quite get right.

“Excuse me,” she said, her voice a severe chime.

“Good morning, Anita,” Beth said.

“Where are we right now?” She appraised us with her wide hazel eyes. The green ran through them in veins like a leaf. They were bright with intelligence but dull at the edges like a mirror starting to fog.

“We're at Willow Creek, Anita. You're staying here a few days while they fix your hot water heater,” Beth said, not even looking up.

“There's nothing wrong with my house,” the woman—Anita—said.

“They're playing Bingo in the recreation room, why don't you go join them?”
Beth said.

“What I'm going to do is figure all this out,” Anita said. As she walked away I saw the psoriasis on the nape of her neck, as scaly as a chicken's leg. There was a dusting of white flakes on her shoulders and back, marring her illusion of dignity.

Beth reached for a half-eaten donut that rested on a grease stained cocktail napkin. Crumbs fell everywhere as she took a bite, her teeth gnashing into the doughy circle. I looked away.

“You ever deal with Alzheimer's before?”

I shook my head.

“Well that was Anita,” Beth explained, her mouth thick with donut. “She’s been here two years. She has dementia real bad. She’ll ask you every day where she is. Thinks she’s still going home. Whatever you do, don’t tell her she’s here permanently.”

“Why, what happens?”

Beth just snorted and finished her donut.

That night I went home and wrote a poem about a woman who dies old and alone but doesn’t mind since she can’t remember anyone anyway.

At the end of my first week I was exhausted.

In the training course they told us to never compare the elderly to children; they said it took away their dignity. But it’s all I could think to compare them to. They were just as needy and temperamental. There were the patients you couldn’t leave alone or they’d wander away. There were patients that went into hysterics if you told them no. There were certain patients you couldn’t leave alone or they’d fight. And then there was the piss and the shit. I felt like a glorified babysitter. Sure they had the wisdom of the ages but what good was the wisdom of the ages if you couldn’t even remember your own name? I couldn’t help but appreciate the cyclical nature, the symmetry of life. Ashes to ashes.

The thing about working at a nursing home was that it was predictable. Life followed a carefully structured routine, giving order to chaos. Even the most disorientated patient could find their way from place to place. The floor was designed the same way

prisons and schools are, linear and intuitive. You could survive on nothing but muscle memory alone, zero reliance on the brain's messages and synapses.

Even their responses were repetitive. They were like drunks restating themselves over and over again. Every time I said, "Hi Anita" she'd say, "What?" the word snapping like campfire word. I'd say, "I was just saying hi." She'd say, "Oh, hello."

You could tell time by Anita. She was more reliable than my watch. She followed the same path every day, making her rounds like the second hand of a clock, never deviating. She woke up at 8:00 and came to the nurse's station asking where she was. She went to breakfast at 8:15. At 9:00 she came to the nurse's station to ask where she was. At 9:15 she got her morning pills. She attended the daily activity at 10:00. Board games, puzzle time, bingo, chorus. Chorus was her favorite. She had a lilting soprano voice, but always complained about her tone-deaf counterparts. She loved the song *Catch a Falling Star*. She'd hum it all day long and it would inevitably get stuck in my head. Lunch was at 12:00 followed by her afternoon med pass. At 4:00 she'd sit on the bench in the hallway and call her son and daughter from an outdated flip phone. Neither would answer. Then she'd ask where she was. At 6:00, after dinner, Anita came to the nurse's station and asked where she was. At 8:00 we gave her her nighttime meds. At 9:00 she was in bed. The routine gave her sense. It limited the choices she had to make. There was no question what tomorrow would bring because it was already decided for her. In the mind of a patient with dementia time does not shift, it is forever suspended. At the end of the day the slate is wiped clean; there is no tomorrow or yesterday, living each day on repeat.

My life was much the same. My day was regimented and structured. I was just like Anita, a second hand on the clock ticking away the time until a new day began.

“I think I’m getting through to Anita,” I said one night at dinner. “She remembered my name today.”

“Oh honey,” Mom said gently. It was the same tone you use when soothing a sick child (and I’d know). “People with dementia don’t get better like that. I’m sure Anita likes you because you’re kind to her, but you shouldn’t get your hopes up.”

I could never watch my mom eat at the table. She had this habit of combining all the food on her plate, letting the different components touch, running into each other like two armies clashing. One bite could contain rice, fish broccoli or chicken, asparagus, pasta. To make matters worse, she talked with her mouth full. She was an otherwise polite woman, but liked talking so much that even a full mouth didn’t stop her.

Me, I chewed like a cow chews its cud, slowly and unenthusiastically.

I once heard that slow eaters are better in bed. It shows patience, the ability to delay pleasure. But, as my sister so lovingly pointed out to me, no one wants to fuck a skeleton.

“There’s no cure, Elly Belly,” my dad said.

Mom gasped like Dad had just cut the wire of a ticking bomb. He wasn’t supposed to call me that.

That was my dad’s nickname for me. To him I was never El or Eleanor, it was always Bell or Belly. He would lift me up and throw me onto his lap when I was younger

and blow raspberries on my stomach while I writhed with manic laughter. Now the nickname was forbidden. Dr. Prickett said it could be a potential trigger.

“I know there’s no cure,” I plowed on. “But I think we are starting to have a connection.”

They were right of course. Like the capsizing of a sinking ship, all there was to do with dementia was slow down the damage. One way or another, the ship was going to sink.

At work they gave us a guide to gauge what stage an Alzheimer’s patient was on. Level 1 being the beginning of symptoms with level 7 being the most severe. Once a person starts climbing up the levels they have about eight years to live. Eight years of living in a fog, behind a shade of the world, having your identity flayed piece by piece while your loved ones watched helpless on the side. It was like being stripped naked and sent to a place where no one spoke the language, where you could not tell friend from foe. Each day, each hour consumed with questions, with answers that cannot satisfy; like when you were young and you asked your parents why the sky was blue and they said *it just is*.

“Well I think that’s great,” my mom said.

“Me too,” my dad said.

I was sitting with Anita in her room. She’d been here so long she’d scored one of the few private rooms. It was almost 10:00 and had been a quiet night; I only had one hour left in my shift. Anita was showing me her costume jewelry which she stored in a massive walnut armoire. Anita delighted in showing off her jewelry collection.

There was a knock on her door.

“Come in,” Rita cooed—she loved company.

It was the shift nurse, Tanya. “It’s time for your medicine, Miss Rita,” she said.

Tanya was a jovial woman with an infectious laugh. She was seven months pregnant and even when she complained about her swollen ankles and swelling belly she did so with a smile. She shuffled her girth through the door, leaving the med cart outside. “Ellie, can you go check on Mr. Hussey? He needs help with his TV.”

I said goodnight to Anita and walked outside. That’s when I saw the unattended med cart, keys still in it. I looked down the hallway. Empty. I approached the cart like it would spook if I came at it too quickly. I felt my pulse quicken as I tried one of the drawers experimentally. It opened. I didn’t know what I was looking for. I recognized most of the pills—antidepressants, antianxiety (I was already on those), blood thinners, cholinesterase inhibitors. Painkillers. The powder bill pills stood out like a robin’s eggs in a nest. I picked up the clipboard and made a quick adjustment, marveling at how easy this was. I picked up one of the pills and put it in my pocket, thinking of the song Anita always sang, *Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket, save it for a rainy day.*

The pill sat in my pocket for the rest of the night. When I got home I took it out and held it in my palm, cradling it as gently as a delicate flower. It made me feel safe.

This became a habit of mine. I spent every shift looking for opportunities to take the pills. I was smart about it, sometimes waiting weeks before pocketing another.

I kept the pills behind a framed picture of a field of wildflowers. Every time I added to the collection I felt a thrill. I had no intention of using them unless I had to. I thought of my growing collection as my insurance policy, my rainy day fund.

“So, Eleanor, how are you feeling today?” My therapist, Dr. Prickett (“Call me Ned”) was the handsome dad type; the kind of guy his daughter’s friends probably had school girl crushes on. He was both masculine and trim. He had a sharp jawline covered by a thick but well maintained beard, he wore black rimmed glasses that suggested intelligence. His clothing was immaculate from the perfect Windsor knot of his tie to the shining golden wedding band. His various medical degrees were framed and displayed with prominence on the wall behind his desk, the blackletter font spelling out his accomplishments.

I saw Dr. Prickett twice a week. I refused to call him Ned. If I was going to call him anything other than Dr. Prickett it was my own private nickname for him—Dr. Prick.

“I’m fine,” I said.

When Dr. Prickett looked at me he saw an obstinate girl who refused to help herself. A petulant child acting out. When I looked at him I saw a jackal.

Dr. Prickett tapped his pen against his notepad. He crossed his legs, resting his foot on his knee. “Come on, Eleanor, this is a safe place.”

I almost laughed out loud. I felt about as safe here as a gazelle that had wandered into a lion’s den.

“I’m fine.”

The first few weeks out of the hospital did not go well.

This was after my mom had found my stockpile of pills that I’d been ferretting away. Antidepressants, anti anxiety meds, even the multi vitamins. The cocktail they had me on was making me as bloated and swollen as a water logged corpse and was I kept me

in such a fog that it was like I was seeing the world from behind a veil.

I started hiding the medicine after a trip to the mall with my mom and sister. Mom had needed throw pillows. When we got to the mall and joined the tides of people flowing through the hallways it felt like we were young again and Mom was taking us shopping for school clothes, an experience that always managed to fill me with dread.

The numbers and letters of garments tormented me. Every year they came out with a smaller size. 0 became 00. XS became XXS. Every time I thought I'd caught up they'd change the game.

I would see girls like me, all of us trying to make our bodies fit into the clothes like perfect cookie cutter figures. Me, I felt like the leftover dough that you mashed together and tried to make look uniform, but it never came out quite right.

My mom and sister had walked into the furniture store. I was trailing behind, trying to ignore the size 00 mannequins like a priest walking through a red light district. There was a vitamin store across the hall from the furniture store. An associate had set up a booth there with a flashy sign that said *free body fat testing*.

My traitorous feet brought me over. The associate was wearing the store's red polo shirt but had an edgy look about her; nose piercing, heavy eyeliner, dyed red streak in her hair. She had a starved, animalistic look about her—one that I recognized. She was wearing a red beaded bracelet just like the one I used to wear. The one they'd confiscated at the other place.

We were pro anas. We had quite the community, especially online. I'd been obsessed with message boards and blogs, gleaning knowledge and getting inspiration—*thinspiration* as we called it.

Everything looks good on skinny.

Don't lose faith, lose weight.

The pain of looking in the mirror hurts more than starving.

She gave me a conspiratorial grin and I stepped up to the machine.

She took my reading.

“Nice,” she said. “Don’t give up, you’re doing great.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I guess you can say that I was when I relapsed.

I stopped taking the pills, I fed most of my meals to the dog, I snuck out at night to run, and I hid the pills that were supposed to be making me better. One night I’d eaten so little that I passed out in a neighbor’s yard; I was only five houses away from home. Then they found the pills where I’d been hiding them in my bookshelf.

My parents threatened to send me back to the other place. They didn’t know if they could do it on their own, but I promised to try harder.

Enter Dr. Prickett, who was staring at me like a disappointed parent. He tried a different tactic. “How’s work going?” His mouth quirked into a self-important grin at this, work had been his idea after all.

“Fine.”

He looked at me exasperatedly and wrote something down. I imagined it was something like *maintains hostile attitude*. “How can I help you, Eleanor, when you won’t talk to me?”

He was always doing that, punctuating his sentences with my name. It was a tactic hostage negotiators used on terrorists and kidnapers to remind them of their humanity.

“What’s there to talk about? You have the notes, you know my story.”

“Yes, but I’d like to hear it from you.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and sank further into the couch.

“Let’s try something else.” He put down the pad of paper and his pen in a gesture of defeat and reached into his desk and pulled out a manila folder. It was a worksheet. Dr. Prickett loved worksheets.

The first time he’d suggested that we try something new had been in my second session. This was the same session he’d declared that I had a death wish.

“I want you to write a letter to yourself before you got sick. I want you to give your past self a list of things to live for,” he’d said. “You must have something to live for, Eleanor. You can put anything down.”

“I don’t see what good this will do for my past self unless you also happen to have a time machine,” I’d said.

“It’s just an exercise.”

“I’m not allowed to exercise.”

I never wrote the letter. I couldn’t think of anything. This was the moment I decided Dr. Prickett was a fucking hack.

Dr. Prickett also had me keep an ongoing Thought Log to help me counter negative thoughts or anxiety. I was supposed to write the negative thought and a rational counterstatement. He wrote me examples in his slanting, half cursive script. Negative thought: *“I forgot my daughter at daycare, I’m a bad parent.”* Rational Counterstatement: *“I made a mistake and I’ll be careful not to make that mistake again.”*

Negative thought: I hate my life.

Counterstatement: I have a cache of pills if it gets too bad. Save it for a rainy day.

He passed the worksheet over to me. It was a sheet of paper with adjectives. It was titled “My Positive Traits.”

“Take a minute to look through this list of words, Eleanor. I want you to circle all of your positive attributes.”

I looked down the list. *Friendly, Helpful, Generous, Creative, Hard Working, Funny, Brave, Insightful, Empathetic, Serious, Attractive, Confident.* I circled *Determined.*

“Good, good, Eleanor. Would you like to share a story with me of a time you were determined?”

I glowered at him. “How about the time I tried to starve myself to death.”

He put his pad of paper down.

“I think that’s enough for today.”

When the patients weren’t acting like children they were acting like teenagers. I was talking to a patient named Glenda at the nurse’s station when Anita started coming down the hall, “Yoo hoo!” she called.

“Oh no, here she comes,” Glenda said in a tone so haughty it made me feel like I was back in middle school and that Glenda was one of the popular girls trying to avoid an undesirable. She wished me a quick goodbye and dashed away.

I liked Anita. She was proud and venerable; she thought herself above it all and had just as much contempt for the world as I did. Her interludes to the nurse’s station broke the monotony of the day. She’d complain about the other patients, her room, the

food, the service and in a way her discontent echoed my own. At least Anita still had a personality, the dementia hadn't stripped her of that yet. I marveled at her ability to maintain her dignity in the face of her disease.

Anita came up to the station. She was wearing the same outfit as yesterday and smelled like moth eaten furniture, but her jewelry was gleaming, her hair was set, and her lipstick was fresh.

We went through the usual routine of questions. I told her that her hot water heater was being fixed.

"Are you married yet?" Besides asking when she was getting out of Willow Creek, this was her favorite question to ask me.

I'd told her that I wasn't.

"Well you're going to be an old maid if you don't watch out."

Though she was widowed, Anita had a family. Her daughter was robust woman who was the type that looked like she was always coming back from some physical activity. She'd storm into the ward in her leggings and expensive sneakers and spend twenty minutes with her mother, leaving the corridors smelling like sweat and chlorine. Her son Daniel paid for her care, but I never saw him in person. He must have thought the money made up for not visiting.

"It's a terrible thing, to be alone," she said, clenching her jaw. "I'm like a lost soul."

This was something that I would have said sardonically to the doctor's and I laughed.

My mirth was all it took. I'd seen pictures of the Roman god Janus before, double faced and grim. Even though both sides looked the same they represented opposites. Even though Anita's face didn't change, it was like some cosmic switch took place. The face turned around and I was dealing with the side of her that harbored all the anger and hurt and confusion that her brain couldn't make out.

Her voice scratched me like a cheap wool sweater with all the coarseness and none of the warmth.

"I'm not staying here forever, you know. God almighty. I wouldn't expect you to understand. No one consulted me about this. And they just drag me everywhere. I don't know anyone here. This is making me nuts."

I couldn't calm her down. She was agitated and making a scene, pacing and throwing her hands up, chest heaving.

"Why don't you try locking yourself up in your room all by yourself. It makes me so angry. I didn't come here to make friends you know."

"Would you like me to take you back to your room?" I said, scrambling for purchase.

"Oh would you just shut up."

Even though all scientific inquiry was working against me, I realized that I had hoped I could help Anita. If I put enough time in and made enough of an impression I thought her brain could fight against the dementia. Why would she make an exception for me? I was nothing special to her. She was beyond recovery, but I wanted to throw her a life raft and give her something to grip onto as the treacherous depths of her mind grew

more difficult to navigate. But I might as well have been throwing her a Styrofoam pool noodle in the midst of a hurricane.

I thought of how my mind had betrayed me. *Body dysmorphia* they called it, when your reflection shows you a distorted picture of yourself. My brain had made me as big as a bus. Even when it got to the point where my thighs had a gap between them and my ribs showed through my skin like I was a walking anatomy lesson still the mirror told me where my flaws were.

Anita wasn't allowed to look at mirrors either. She would look and ask who the woman in the mirror was because it didn't look like her.

"Where are we?" Anita said.

I didn't answer.

"Hello?"

"You told me to shut up," I said. "So I'm shutting up."

"I never said that."

"Yes you did."

"Well I apologize, but that doesn't answer where the hell we are right now."

Anita had a stroke. I came into work to find her in a hospital bed, one side of her face slack and a bedpan under her ass. She wasn't paralyzed but she couldn't talk anymore. As if her condition hadn't been any worse, now she was trapped within her own mind.

These things happened all the time. In my time at Willow Creek I'd seen patients die, I'd seen them get worse, but Anita had been such a fixture. It was like having a constellation from the night sky suddenly disappearing.

Since she couldn't talk Anita learned to communicate in other ways. She threw things; sometimes her outbursts became so violent we had to sedate her. She groaned in pain and discomfort, her wails so despondent that they made my skin crawl. And she cried, her silent tears trailing down the crevasses of her wrinkled face.

Any time I could find time to spare I would go to Anita's room and sit in the rocking chair by her bed. We dressed her every day in a medical gown and nothing more. Her hair lay flat and thinning across her head. All of the jewelry in her armoire sat unused.

She was a husk. Just the casing of the woman I knew. Only her eyes were expressive. They responded to people and things, her pupils dilating and contracting at her pleasure and displeasure.

Anita had a small CD player and a collection of choir and opera music. On the nights that I had time I'd play one of these CDs for her, the volume on low like we were fugitives. When I played the music she'd close her eyes in content, both sides of her face slackening in peace.

I'd just finished a CD of a collection of arias when I heard voices outside Anita's room.

"I hear they're moving Anita."

"Where?"

"A low income home."

"When?"

"As soon as they can get her a bed."

I registered the look of shock and panic in Anita's eyes. She may not have comprehended the details of her situation, but she knew that change—and not good change—was in her future. She seemed to beseech me. Her hazel eyes turned to me in the halfdark of the room. *Help me*, they seemed to say.

The rumors were true, Anita's son couldn't afford Willow Creek with all of Anita's new care needs. They were moving in in two days. I was walking towards Anita's room when I saw her daughter and a man were coming out of the doorway, lugging Anita's jewelry armoire between them. The man must have been Anita's son. They were bickering.

“She won't need it at the other place, Denise.”

“Mom's gone everywhere with that jewelry armoire. She can't not take it.”

“Well it's not Mom anymore.”

They didn't even see me as they passed by.

When I walked into the room Anita's eyes were fixed on the empty space where her armoire had been. Her face was stained with tears. I kissed her forehead, breathing in the day old scent of her.

“I'll help you,” I said.

Anita could still take medication. She took pills with water, one sip per pill. Every time she'd swallow a bit of drool would escape her prim mouth.

The next night I wore baggier pants than usual.

After my rounds I sat next to Anita's bed and pulled the bag of pills out of my pocket; I set them on her nightstand. It was my entire supply.

For a moment I wondered if I was wrong. This could all go wrong, so wrong. But then Anita's eyes caught mine, wide and pleading like a wild thing caught in a trap. She had so few choices left, she should have the right to choose to live or die. She was suffering and it was in my power to help her end it if she wanted to.

I explained to her what to do, keeping my directions as simple as possible. As I walked her through it Anita's eyes blazed with understanding.

I stroked her hair, making it as neat as I could. I clipped an old pair of earrings onto her lobes. She jerked a nod of approval when I showed her the tube of lipstick and I applied it on her thin and cracked lips.

As I walked out of the room I thought of the song Anita always sang.

Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket.

Never let it fade away.